

## Help, I'm a Science Student!

Studying science can stretch your faith. You'll find questions about ethics, miracles, conflicting ideas on the origins of life, and other tricky issues, and that's before you start talking to your classmates!

### Science vs Christianity?

Many people would have us believe that a "real" faith in God is completely incompatible with "real" science. We so often hear atheists justifying their belief that God doesn't exist by using scientific evidence. But amazingly, in spite of popular stereotypes, science has strong Christian roots! It was only when people began to believe that God created a rational, ordered world, worthy of investigation, that proper scientific studies began to be carried out. Christianity and science have other things in common: principles such as trust, honesty, and selflessness are essential, and both have a strong tradition of teaching and international collaboration.

To claim that Christianity is incompatible with a scientific enquiring mind, as some would have us believe, is to contradict the 40% of the scientific community who believe in a personal God who answers prayer (this survey was published in the science journal *Nature* in 1997). So you can immediately be encouraged that there are many scientists in every level of academia, industry and education, who have a firm faith in God, and are prepared to be vocal about it!

### Being a Christian in science

So are there any challenges for a Christian working in science? Of course! As in any other career, we have to learn to juggle commitments, handle stress and pressure, deal with the politics that comes when people work together, and carry out our work with integrity and consideration for others. Anyone working in research will often have to work long hours, and learn to deal with the uncertainty that goes along with experimental work. We all have to make ethical decisions, and as a Christian, especially in the biomedical sciences, this may require a lot of thought to decide where exactly to draw the line, and possibly even a withdrawal from certain areas of work.

That sounds like an awful lot of hard work, why bother?! Well first of all, it is important for Christians to be salt and light in every area of life, so long as we're not compromising our beliefs (a career in crime might not be justifiable...) Secondly, it is an amazing privilege to be able to study something that is both interesting and exciting, and will also benefit the rest of humankind. Last, but by no means least, as a Christian it is a way to draw closer to God, as we come to understand his creation in ever increasing detail. As the astronomer Johann Kepler said, we *are* "thinking God's thoughts after him".

## **Life in Biomedical Science**

There are some subjects that are considered more controversial than most, especially in the biomedical sciences. People get nervous around subjects like reproductive biology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and my own field, genetics. When I introduce myself at church, I usually describe myself as a biologist. If I'm brave enough to mention genetics, the reaction I usually get is a variation on "that must be a hard area for a Christian!!"

Ironically, I almost chose to study plant genetics because I thought I would avoid the controversial ethical issues. Little did I know! It's easy to label a speciality as a no-go area because of one particular headline issue, but in reality it's possible to stick to your values in almost any area of science, as research projects can be tailored to your own interests. A couple of times I had to mention to my supervisor that I wasn't willing to work on certain things, but they were supportive of my decision, and didn't make me feel guilty about not being able to do certain experiments.

Many Christians who are interested in biology are attracted to the caring professions or teaching because it gives them a chance to have a more immediate effect on society. This is great, but we mustn't be put off from the incredible opportunities in research by a few tricky issues. As biomedical scientists we can have our say in ethical decisions that are made, and how new technologies are used. Scientific research is a very cooperative process, and is carried out in an increasingly international community. Gone is the image of a lonely worker in a big lab. You're more likely to be packed into a small space like sardines, sharing resources and spending lots of time commiserating with each other over failed experiments. There are plenty of opportunities to work abroad, and share your knowledge in less developed countries if that's your passion, and although the results are further down the line, your work may eventually benefit more people than you could imagine.

### **Where to find help**

So where can you find help to think things through? First of all, there are plenty of great books that cover the issues that you will meet on your course. Try "Beyond Belief - Science, Faith & Ethical Challenges" (Lion, pb, 2004) by Denis Alexander and Robert White for a general overview, or "Life in our hands" by John Bryant and John Searl (IVP, pb, 2004) for a thought-provoking introduction to bioethics. There are lots of websites too, so have a look at [www.cmf.org.uk/](http://www.cmf.org.uk/) for articles on ethics the Christian Medical Fellowship, or [www.licc.org.uk/](http://www.licc.org.uk/) for loads of help on living out your faith at work.

Christians in Science has over 600 members who work in science or are concerned about science-faith issues. Here you will find a source of good books and articles, a chance to talk things through, and encouragement from people higher up the ladder. You only have to read the testimonies of some of Britain's top scientists on this website to find out that it is definitely possible for someone with a real faith to do real science!